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REVIEW: TWYLA M. HANSEN & LINDA M. HASSELSTROM'S *DIRT SONGS: A PLAINS DUET*

CHRISTINE STEWART-NUÑEZ

Poems of place emerge so intimately from an intersection of landscape and culture that they couldn't exist someplace else. ¹ Twyla M. Hansen and Linda M. Hasselstrom's *Dirt Songs: A Plains Duet*, Winner of the 2012 Nebraska Book Award, poetically embodies the Great Plains. These writers transport readers through high skies and over sprawling ranches and one-tavern towns, pinning stories and memories to creeks and kitchens, pies and opossums. Yet they resist "provincial" poetry; this book's emotional range—nostalgia, loss, joy, serenity—reflect broader human concerns. With its crisp subject matter, conversational writing styles, and exquisite renderings of place, *Dirt Songs* should be high on the "to read" list for any literature lover.

In this poetic "duet," Hansen's voice comes first. Academically trained as an agroecologist, she finds poetry in the perimeters of nature, in spaces where she witnesses change. In "Morning Fog," for example, she zooms in on the collective dust and exhaust we breathe; in "Acts of Faith," she worries about the ways we squander the soil, water, and air—the resources that connect us. And she invites readers to meditate with her. She opens "Bird" with the comment, "Some days I see more than I wish: wax outline on my window / the perfect shape of bluejay, replete with bits of feather" (1-2) and we follow her contemplation of the laws of aerodynamics, a memory from the 1950s, and snapshots from the "labyrinth of youth" (12). Hansen moves from material phenomena—eggs, bread, lettuce, Shredded Wheat—to spiritual or historical realms. Like the natural

world she studies, her poems reveal meaning to us.

Dirt Songs isn't a book for readers who prefer spare, associative poetry. Hansen's clear voice leaves patterns for us to follow as she unfolds her thoughts. "Where soil is dry, / weather inhospitable, / no one is watching, / red cedars thrive" she writes in "Survival" (1-4). She hooks readers in with refreshing images. "August 12 in the Nebraska Sand Hills Watching the Perseids Meteor Shower" opens with the image "a moonless night untethers its wild polka-dots" (2). Most of Hansen's poems stretch across the page, a fullness balanced by the uniformity of couplets, tercets, and quatrains. This gives her a visual space to pose questions, bring in other voices, and dive into details gleaned from research. Take, for example, "Leap of Faith:"

Just think: billions

of insects overhead, billions of stars in our galaxy, the untold number
of angels dancing somewhere unseen. Not much comfort
knowing we share

sixty percent of our genes with bananas. We know carnage
on the windshield
at 75 mph driving I-80 in summer, but bugs riding high?
Pilots know. Even

Charles Lindbergh collected them at 5,000 and 12,000 feet
on flights across the Atlantic. A live termite was captured at
19,000 feet. A matter of survival.... (8-14)

With the long-breath lines contained in couplets, we can
move along with the poet's thoughts, even as she points to
the connections between information and images.

Hansen's best poetry whittles down an image to
reveal its relationship to place or to link it with a shared



human concern as she does in “Little Bluestem,” “Great Horned Owl,” “Wild Turkey,” and “Lettuce.” In “The Cardinal,” for example, Hansen opens obliquely: “The heart does not easily give up. / Late fall, berries gone, bare limbs / corkscrew in daylight” (1-3). Yet she reads the bird’s “insistent charge toward glass” (6) as possibility, and she transforms him into a messenger, “beak tapping politely on the glass-- // clinging, peering in: *as long as I breathe, I hope*” (20-22). This sharp, focused poem opens out at the end, revising the way we perceive futility. Similarly, in “My Granddaughter Sick,” she yokes the inner and outer worlds:

I kiss the top of her fevered head,
her hair fine as milkweed fluff,

delicate like chick down. Meanwhile
the moon, a heavy saucer, reclines

pale and cumbersome above the treeline,
this chilled horizon brittle with bare limbs. (2-7)

Not only is the description of the child’s hair lovely, the way Hansen pulls back the poem to the natural world imbues the poem with a foreboding beauty.

Like Hansen, Hasselstrom’s subject matter emerges from hard-won observation and experience. She, too, explores collective moments. Hasselstrom populates her half of the book with intriguing ancestors, lovers, and strangers whose rituals of cooking, baking, and cleaning connect them across time. “All over America, families are studying / gratitude” (30-31) she writes in “Those Thanksgiving Pie-Makers,” bringing in her own pie-baking practice, “I dust clove powder over my grandmother’s / green glass bowl and reach for the nutmeg grater” (11-12) and the imagined activities of others. And just as many of Hansen’s poems lock one eye on the future, many of Hasselstrom’s poems peer into the past. In “Looking for Grandmother,”

the speaker meditates on aging, on what it means to transform into her ancestor over the years: "In my own looking glass, I see her hair, / the strong bones of her face" (16-17). The memory of the speaker's mother, "who's been dead all winter," (5) seems conjured in the Safeway aisle when a woman complains "Cut flowers don't last" (1) and gives the poet an invitation to elegy. Hasselstrom also takes up "writer's life" moments, inviting readers to peer into a teaching scenarios in a "Visiting Writer in Rock Springs, Wyoming" and "One Afternoon in a Reservation Classroom." She also connects readers to her poetic lineages in "Robbing the Poet" and "When a Poet Dies."

Hasselstrom's poems feel like good conversation. She carves details from memory and observation for readers to ponder, often merging lyric and story. In "How to Pick Green Beans," I admire how she delivers movement in each line:

my grandmother kept her hoe handy,
tilted her bifocals to see the snake,
steadied herself and chopped
until the hissing ceased.
Hooked him with her hoe, swung her arm.
The snake whirled and struck the sky. (14-19)

Her line composition creates tension mid-stanza, and the two end-stopped lines at the end gives readers time to pause and see the swing of the arm and the whirling snake. Solid pacing is essential in good narratives, and Hasselstrom utilizes this knowledge in her poems, which often spill down one whole page and into the next.

Not only does the length add a story-like quality to Hasselstrom's poems, but she gathers and arranges so many dimensional details they seem like mini-videos. She's at her best when these details sit slightly askew, when they speak to complicated tensions of place. In "Autochthonous,"



Sego lilies still grow above the cedars
hidden in the gully. An old man in a rock shop
sells crystals just across the road from the pasture
where the jet trainer crashed forty years ago;
two pilots burned, screaming. Sweet peas
still bloom in Black Gap. (1-6)

The burning wreckage of the jet and its pilots make the lilies and crystals haunting images, a surprising juxtaposition. Later in the poem, the natural images of the Black Hills—rain, grass, sun—shape the speaker's body, blurring the space between flesh and land: "the water/ tastes of limestone percolated through / my bones" (18-20). Yet the tragedies persist; Hasselstrom helps us understand that a celebration of place means an acceptance of its harsh realities and histories.

Dirt Songs: A Plains Duet gathers breath and ritual, welcoming readers with open arms. I enjoyed imagining a thematic dialogue between the poems, which led me to wonder why the Hansen and Hasselstrom chose to publish their work in two halves rather than weaving the poems back and forth. But this was a small disappointment. Overall, these poems will stick with me, especially the power of their keen, balanced vision. Hansen grounds this vision in "Remembrance" with the lines: "For now, we... / craft messages of hope, mingle in the magic of dusk, / let loose fragile lanterns that float away on water" (14-16). Hasselstrom echoes this balance in "Wicca:" "Some of us will remember / our warm flesh tomorrow; / some of us / will still be cold" (14-17).

¹With thanks to Robert Root's introduction to *Landscape with Figures* for this working definition of placed-based writing.